JOEL GRIMES | ACADEMY

10 STEPS TO BECOMING A SUCCESSFUL PHOTOGRAPHER

Unlock the secrets to achieving your dream

JOEL GRIMES

ONE

Practice your craft more than your competition

Repeat, Repeat, Repeat!

I can't emphasize this enough. My success starts with a simple ingredient; I put in more hours practicing my craft than 99% of my competition. This is my secret. Find someone who is at the top of their field, and follow them around for a week. They will wear you out. They are the hardest working people on the planet. Put in the **hours** and great things follow.

When I started out in photography I thought the most talented and brilliant photographers would become the most successful. During my college photo class critiques, I was no stand out. I remember thinking the only hope I had of competing with my fellow classmates was to out work them. I have learned the value of repeating the process over and over until I reached a level of craftsmanship that puts me at the top of my field.

I understand that not everyone can dedicate 12 hours a day, 7 days a week to their craft. However, take a critical look at how much time you waste each day on things that can be eliminated. Ten years ago I set out to reinvent myself, and I committed to creating 50 self-alignments, (non paying photo shoots) a year to advance my career. It was one of the best decision I have ever made and literally launched me on a national/international level. To fulfill that commitment I had to give up things. Make a few sacrifices to chase your dream and put every free minute you can repeating the process over and over.

This Image of Cowboy Greg Wildman was shot with one light in a large Westcott softbox. Always push your strobe light in the same direction as the sun. For my camera setting I used a Canon 5DSR with a Canon 24-70mm 2.8 II at the 24 mm focal length, 200th f/11 ISO 100. I have a complete tutorial showing how I shot this image, covering the shooting and processing, in the series called 'Portrait Photography On Location'.

TWO

Build a body of work in a series

Create a common thread that tells a story

Over the years I have learned some invaluable lessons working in the photography industry. One is that a body of work stands stronger as a whole than as a single image. Repeating a subject matter over and over creates two important effects. First, you become an expert on that subject or particular genre. When I started photographing sports figures, I didn't start out shooting 100 million dollar athletes. I started with the high school kid next door. Then I went to the college level and after two to three years I was shooting some of the biggest athletes in the industry. I got better and better with each shoot, and my eye began to learn what worked and what didn't. Over time I became an expert at photographing athletes. And my body of work as a whole won over the Art Directors and potential clients.

Second, a body of work helps brand you in the industry. You become the go to person when it comes to a specific look or genre. If done right, you become a trend setter, and the person everyone is trying to copy. This filters down into the industry and the word gets out. Becoming an expert allows you to raise your rates and soon you're working with the biggest budgets in the industry.

Build a body of work you love. This makes sense, but think about it, chances are it will take you a few years before your body of work will start to take hold in the marketplace. So pick a subject matter you will stick with for the long haul. My observation is that most photographers stick with something for about a year and then switch to something entirely new, and never really master anything. Put together a five to ten year business plan and stick to it.

This Image of Jenifer was shot early on as I began shooting athletes. This became my typical three light approach using one light overhead. Here I used a 5' Octabox and for my edge lights I used two Westcott large softbox's. With time I was able to fine tune this lighting technique to each athlete in a matter of seconds.
For my camera setting I used a Canon 1Ds with a Canon 70-200mm 2.8 at the 100 mm focal length. 200th. f/7.1 ISO 100

THREE

Avoid following the latest trends

Become a creative force

It is always easier to follow someone else than to forge your own way. When it comes to the industry trends, I see so many photographers jumping from one trend to another. There are a few reasons why chasing trends is not good idea. First, a trend normally brings a flood of people doing the same thing. You tend to easily get lost in the crowd. In addition, by the time you master the look of the latest trend, it has become old news. Chances are the artist who has set the trend has spent years fine tuning and mastering that look before it hit the marketplace.

Second, on the subject of being an Artist, you will often hear me say that “You are unique, one of a kind, there is nobody on the planet just like you”. You have something to offer the world, why waste it on copying someone else's vision? As an Artist you have to believe that if you stick with following your intuition and building a body of work that fits your creative vision, you will become a trend setter. There will always be a group of followers that will be influenced by your work.

One day I had a Art Director from a prominent ad agency call me. She had just left a meeting with a photographer discussing possible strategies for an upcoming ad campaign. During the meeting the photographer kept showing her some of my sport images as examples of where he would like to take the campaign. He kept saying he wanted to shoot the “Joel Grimes three light edgy look”. She kept thinking to herself, why hire a photographer who is looking to copy someone else when she could hire the real thing. I ended up shooting that campaign which resulted in a lucrative paycheck. Why be a copy, the original is worth a whole lot more.

This Image of Ashley was shot with one light, a Westcott 32” RapidBox.
I shot this around 4:00 PM in the afternoon. To overpower the sun I had to set strobe output and aperture at f/22. However, I used a 6 stop ND filter to create a shallow depth of field (f/2.8) softening the foreground and the background. This effect creates a dreamy overall feel to the image.

FOUR

Recognize that not everyone will love your work

There is a critic around every corner

Without exception every human being on this planet suffers to some degree from being weak, fragile and insecure. I will prove it to you. Post one of your images on a social media platform where people leave a comment. You will receive responses that say you rock, you're a genius, that you're the greatest photographer in the world. Ninety-nine praises and then someone comes along and says **you suck**, that your image is the worst they have ever seen and that you should get out of photography and get a real job. Ninety- nine praises and one bad critique. When you go to bed at night what do your remember, the ninety -nine praises? No you don't, you remember the one bad critique.

This is our humanity. We all suffer from it. You may think you are tough as nails. Go show your portfolio to an Art Director at a prominent ad agency and have that person tell you to find a new career. That is exactly what happened to me on my very first portfolio showing. And how did I react? Probably the same way you would, I was crushed and wanted to quit. At the time I could bench over 300 pounds and could fight off five attackers in a dark alley (Ok, I might be exaggerating a bit), but could not handle one harsh critique. What a revelation that was.

It is impossible to step out into the real world without experiencing a harsh criticism that will literally bring you to tears. If you have not experienced that yet, then you have not truly stepped out into the real world. It is brutal. But there is good news. Understand your humanity and know that not everyone will love your work. Rejection is just a part of life, and you have to believe that eventually someone will fall in love with what you do. In the end you can make a great living off that group of people. Your job is not to win over the masses. I survived that first portfolio showing and didn't let one person steal my dream. So can you.

This Image of Jessica was shot with my three light approach, using the biggest modifiers I owned. For the overhead light I used one Westcott 5' Octabox with a large fill card under the chin. For the two side lights I used the 7' Westcott Octabox. I moved the modifiers in as close as I could to create the softest light possible. I then used some Photoshop techniques to turn her skin into a porcelain look.

FIVE

Persistence will win over more clients than a great portfolio

The goal is to get hired

There are a number of myths that have been shattered over the years as I have worked in the photo industry. None is greater than believing that the best photographers make the most money. I believed that if I mastered my craft then the work would follow. When it comes to getting work in the real world, persistence will win over more clients than a great portfolio. Now I am not advocating sloppy craftsmanship. I want my work to compete with the best in the industry. But the question is, how do I get work?

When I was studying photography in college, if you had asked me what the role of a photographer looked like, I would never have thought that being a sales person would be part of that equation. Making cold calls, sending out promo packets, pounding on ad agency doors was not even a concept that crossed my mind. It is hard to believe now, but I am naturally a very shy person. When I started out making cold calls, I was literally so nervous that the phone was shaking and my tongue felt like fifty pounds. My first calls were a disaster. With time and a whole lot of practice, it got easier. My first year in business I eventually logged in over 3000 cold calls, and showed my portfolio close to 200 times. Overcoming this hurdle launched my photography career.

Every year over one hundred thousand college students graduate with a degree in photography across the USA, and only 11% end up working in their field. Why is that? You could say that it is because their work is not up to the industry standards. But an 89% failure rate! If that's the case, our higher educational institutions need to offer a refund. The problem lies not necessarily in mastering the tools of the trade, but in the inability to exert oneself in the marketplace. What hurdles are you willing to overcome to live your dream? Learn the power of persistence.

This Image of Stephen was shot in a studio on a white backdrop with one Westcott 5' Octabox as my overhead light and two 36x48 large softboxes as my side lights. The background image was shot in New Orleans using a Canon 17mm Tilt Shift lens to create a larger mega pixel file and then I composited the two images in Photoshop.

SIX

Get your name into the brain of the person you want to hire you

Learn the Power of Eight

Not surprisingly, studies have shown that only 5% of creatives market effectively. So what keeps 95% of us from succeeding at marketing? One major hurtle stands out above all others; **the fear of rejection**. Studies have also shown that if we do exert ourselves in the marketplace, we will at most make two attempts at soliciting a potential client and then give up. The odds of securing any kind of return on two attempts is less that 10%. Not good odds. The reason we give up is because it hurts to get a cold shoulder or a rude brush off.

But here is the good news. It takes around eight attempts before someone will remember who we are. Once again, this falls under the fact we are human. Studies have shown if we make at least eight attempts to get our name into the brain of the person we want to hire us, the odds go up to 80% we will get a return on our marketing investment. I like these odds!

My whole success as a commercial photographer for 35 years is a direct result of knowing this simple principle. Once your name gets lodged into the brain of a potential Art Director, Photo Editor, Marketing Communications Director, etc… it is just a matter of time before they have a crisis and they need a photographer to fill a slot. The fact that your name is in their brain increases your credibility. This is how branding works. Because your name is in their brain, you must be a good photographer, reliable, and someone to rescue them from a crisis. It is the most magical thing to see, and I have witnessed it over and over my whole career. Learn the Power of Eight!

This Image of Don Roberson was shot with one light in a Westcott extra-large softbox.
I also shot this portrait in HDR, bracketing my ISO to create one stop over, normal, and one stop under exposure. Bracketing ISO gives me the ability to cover both the strobe and the ambient variables at the same time.
For my camera setting I used a Canon 5DSR with a Canon 24-70mm 2.8 II at the 24 mm focal length. 1 sec. f/7.1 ISO 100
I have a complete tutorial that covers me shooting and processing this image in the series 'Portrait Photography On Location'.

SEVEN

Human behavior is very predictable

Use this to your advantage

I would have never thought that the study of human behavior would play a role in my success as a photographer. When I started out in this industry all I wanted to do was take pictures. But understanding that human behavior is extremely predictable can completely change the way you look at getting work and how to you win over clients.

We have already talked about how we are all to some degree weak, fragile and insecure. Understanding this helps reveal why I come undone when I get criticized or get a door slammed in my face. But understanding the other side of the exchange can help you see why it is so hard to get your foot into the door.

After pounding the streets for over 35 years, I have learned something about the person I am pitching. First, just because they hold a fancy title and could be responsible for paying your bills, they are really not much different than you. They have a lot on their plate. They generally have a demanding boss or client. They have deadlines, budgets, and are over worked. They have a life outside of their workplace. The odds are they are going though life challenges just like you. They could be going through a divorce, loss of a loved one, caring for a newborn that is not sleeping through the night, etc… You make a cold call and they are a bit short with you and give you the brush off. And how do you respond? You get hurt, get mad and cross them off your marketing list. I have a mindset that one day I will get the opportunity to save that potential client from a crisis and will become their knight in shining armor. 95% of all the other photographers will quit and give up. By sticking with them and understanding their humanity, eventually I will win them over.

This Image of Bryce was shot with one light, a Westcott 24" Beauty dish.
To get a wide angle/shallow Depth of Field look, I used Canon's new 35mm 1.4 II lens and a 6 stop Neutral Density filter. The biggest challenge is shooting at the 1.4 aperture and nailing the focus while using a 6 shop ND filter. To overcome that, I use Live View and magnify the focus and use my back focus button to get perfect results every time.

EIGHT

Be driven by the passion for your craft, not how much money you can make

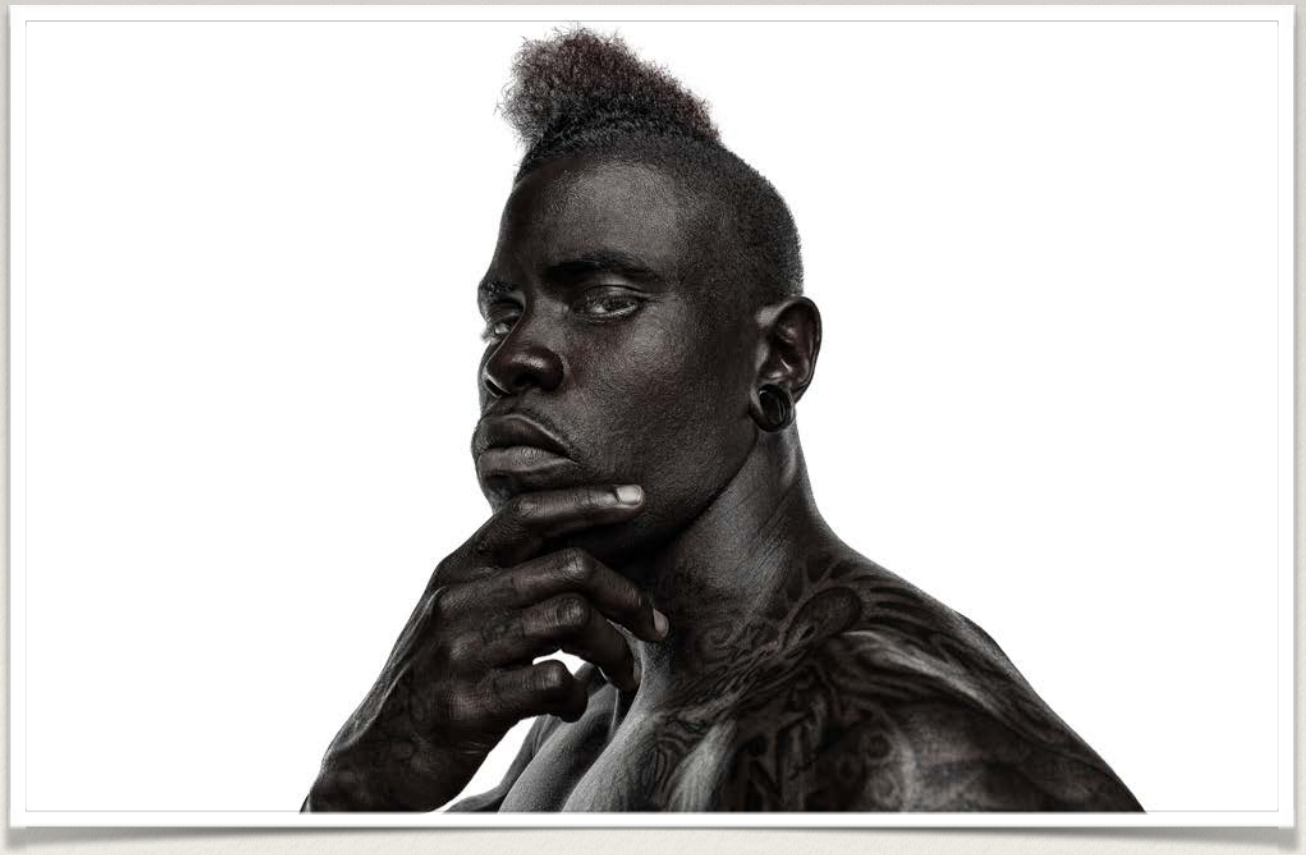
Client can see right through your greed

I have known a fair amount of really good working photographers over the past 35 years. Not one of them that was in it for the money ended up getting rich. If fact, many of them ended up burning out or going through bankruptcy. The die hards that are still in the game after 30 plus years are in it because they have an unending passion for the craft. This passion keeps me current and constantly growing. In fact, the last 10 years have by far been my most productive. And at 60, there are no signs of me quitting any time soon.

Clients can get a sense who is in it for the money. I'm not saying charge less for your services. On the contrary. Those who are in it for the passion end up creating the best work, which in turn positions them higher on the food chain.

Most of the Art Directors I have worked for are looking to hire a photographer that is a creative force, not a technician watching the clock. My passion for creating shows when I am on set working to get the best possible results for the client. And it is contagious. In the end, we tend to work towards a common goal and deliver a much better product.

I made a decision years ago to do all my own retouching. My goal was to build a brand that I could repeat and be consistent. It is this brand that the Art Directors end up hiring me for. I could farm out my retouching and make a lot more money. But in the end, the client knows I am willing to go the extra yard to deliver the best possible product.



This Image of Foz was shot with my typical three edge light approach.
To build drama, I used a Canon 24-70mm 2.8 II at the 24mm focal length setting ,on a full frame Canon 5D Mark III. This stretched the perspective drawing you into his eyes. For the post process, I used black and white filters in Photoshop to darken the skin to add even more drama. I cover this technique in a number of my teaching tutorials.

NINE

Build a trustworthy brand

Your reputation will proceed you

A brand is a connection or a link between two entities. For example, soft drink/Coca Cola, Athletic shoes/Nike. For a brand to be successful, it has to make that connection. It takes a lot of exposure in the marketplace for a product or service to build a trust worthy brand. Often the most successful brands are the ones that become the first in the industry producing something new or innovative.

One of the greatest compliments someone can give me about my work is that when they see one of my images in a publication they know it is mine before they see the credit line. This is because I have developed a look that has been repeated over and over. I have spent the last ten years beating the same drum until it has taken root in the marketplace. This takes a whole lot of patience and dedication. There are times I feel like moving on to something all together new, but I know that for my brand to succeed, I have to stick with my game plan. I often get other photographers criticizing me for doing the same old thing. That just tells me they don't understand the power of building a brand.

Take the risk and build a look that fits your artistic vision and set out to repeat that look until it becomes refined. Then beat it into the ground until that look is linked to your name. It may take three to five years, but in the end it will pay huge dividends. Name any rock star photographer and they have branded a look that more than likely took them a few years of repeating it day in and day out. There are really no short cuts. The good news is you don't have to be brilliant or a creative genius to brand a look that puts you on the map.

This Image of Monique was shot with one Westcott 5' Octabox and two 36x48' large Westcott soft boxes with grids. The grids help eliminate any chance of flare into the lens.
The most important part of getting my lighting right for this type of images ins increasing or decreasing the overhead light until I get the tonal value just right. The only way I know I have got it right is to evaluate the monitor on the back of my camera.

TEN

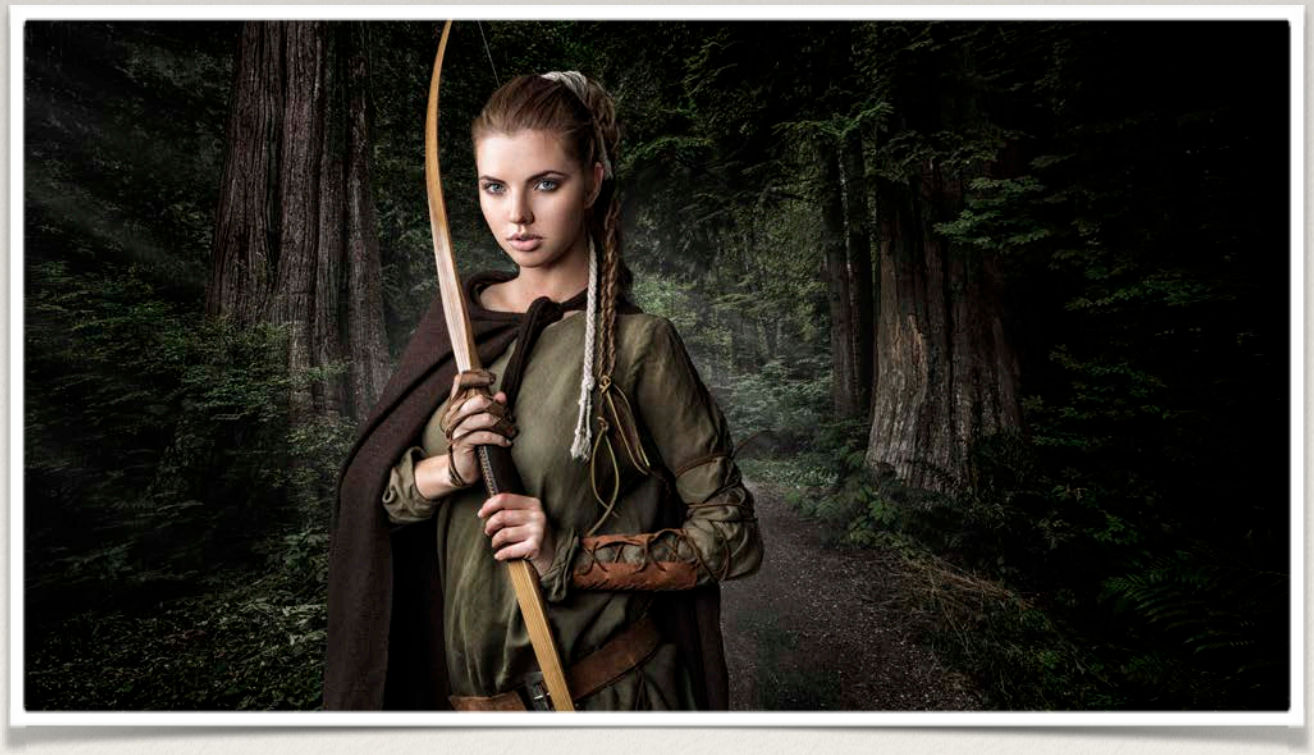
Set your sights on achieving something you believe is beyond your reach

Prove all the nay sayers wrong

How do you see yourself five or ten years down the road. I often ask people. “Where do you want to end up? As a college student studying photography I wanted to be an Artist, creating images with a camera. I idolized the masters like Ansel Adams, Irving Penn, Edward Weston, etc… but career options, I was clueless. After graduation I had a friend who pointed me in the direction of pitching ad agencies. I was like a fish out of water. But I was persistent to make it as a working photographer.

I remember one of my professors in college said that only .001% of all the photographers on the planet would produce a coffee table book. That stuck in my mind. So I set a goal to beat those odds. In 1989 as a naive 32 year old, I secured a publisher and started a project photographing the Navajo people. The project took two years, averaging 200 days each year in the field, living and traveling out of a VW camper van. When I started the project, everyone I talked to said I would never get it done. It was one of the hardest things I have ever done. But after the dust settled I had a national interest coffee table book and a 18 month solo exhibit at the Smithsonian American History museum.

What I learned from that project went well beyond the book project. I learned that with hard work, sacrifice and persistence I could accomplish anything I could set my sights on. That lesson has stuck with me all these years later. I see so many people sell themselves short by looking at the glass half empty. Set your sights on achieving something you believe is beyond your reach. Then one day you end up beating all the odds.



This Image of Elena was shot with one extra-large Westcott softbox. I place the light 90 degrees to the subject to create what I call Rembrandt/Cross Light. This is the most classic light on the planet. You will notice on the shadow side of the face a highlight that resembles a triangle. This is what has been coined “The Rembrandt Triangle”. I position my light until I get the highlight perfect on the cheek.

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MY MISSION

If you spend any time around me you will notice that I possess a unending passion for the creative process and that I truly relish in other's success. In some ways it is to a fault because I work tirelessly trying to encourage others to chase their dream.

When I started out in photography I would never have believed that one day I would be speaking to photographers all over the world. It miraculously fell into my lap, and I don't take it lightly. I am a very blessed person.

One of the hardest things I have found as an educator is trying to get people to forge their own path and not just be a copy of someone else's artistic vision. So you will hear me say things over and over that I hope will encourage you to take a risk and follow your own intuition and become a creative force.

I can be found at the following:

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